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Can Vietnam rise to leadership challenge?

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2020 Survey, conducted by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS)-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore from Nov. 12 to Dec. 1, 2019, unveils both continuity and nuanced change in how regional policymakers and opinion leaders perceive the problems facing the region and whether they are confident in ASEAN's ability to rise to today's challenges.

The survey report canvassed the views of 1,308 Southeast Asians hailing from the region's governments, research institutions, business sector, civil society and media. It sought to understand Southeast Asian perceptions on regional affairs and engagements with the major powers.

According to the survey, domestic political instability, including ethnic and religious tensions, continues to be the region's paramount challenge, being identified by 70.5 percent of respondents. This is a persistent reminder that nation-building in Southeast Asia is far from complete, and remains a major preoccupation in the region's mindshare.

The past year also saw upheavals in the region's economic fortunes due to disruptions and uncertainties from the United States-China trade war and shrinking global trade. The Asian Development Bank adjusted its ASEAN growth forecast down from 4.9 percent to 4.5 percent for 2019 and from 5 percent to 4.7 percent for 2020. Mirroring this reality, economic downturn (68.5 percent) overtook climate change (66.8 percent) as the second biggest concern of respondents in the survey.

At the country-level, the survey findings reflect quite accurately respondents' prevailing perceptions regarding their country-specific conditions. For Brunei, the top concern remains economic downturn while the South China Sea tensions continue to be the biggest security challenge for the Philippines and Vietnam.

Domestic political instability is the paramount concern for Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore and Thailand.

Except for Singapore, which has had low short-term political risks, the other five ASEAN states have faced political uncertainty and even turbulence during the past year. Singapore respondents were probably looking outward to their neighborhood in identifying domestic political instability as the prevailing region-wide concern. As they look inward, economic anxiety looms large as the second biggest concern since Singapore's economy has been hit hard by the trade war.

As disruptions and uncertainties become a new norm, a "cohesive and responsive ASEAN" is a timely and relevant theme for Vietnam's ASEAN chairmanship this year. It singles out "cohesiveness" as the most important element for ASEAN to deal with the many problems facing the region.

Inherent in the theme is the interplay between a "cohesive ASEAN" and a "responsive ASEAN". As remarked by Vietnamese leaders, it reflects the spirit of "think community, act community" in response to the opportunities and challenges ahead.

There is nothing new in this earnest call for ASEAN unity. In fact, this mantra has been replayed time and again by both ASEAN supporters and critics. Yet, the strategic significance of ASEAN unity and the imperative to maintain or restore it has never been more urgent as geopolitical risks arising from the US-China strategic rivalry hang heavily over the region.

The survey reveals the region's growing concern over ASEAN becoming an arena and its member states being proxies of major power competition. This is the biggest concern about ASEAN in Cambodia, the Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam; and the second biggest in Brunei, Malaysia and Thailand. Overall, it comes close (73.2 percent) to ASEAN's biggest Achilles heel, namely the perceived absence of its tangible benefits for people (74.9 percent).

Ranked third in the top list of ASEAN woes is its inability to cope with fluid political and economic developments. All these concerns require ASEAN's unity of purpose and capacity to act. Responsiveness is no longer an aspiration, but a necessity for its relevance moving forward.

The choice of "cohesive and responsive" also reflects the maturity of Hanoi's strategic thinking toward ASEAN, even though ASEAN's value as the main gateway for Vietnam's international integration has diminished, compared to 1995 when it joined ASEAN.

As an example, Vietnam is now the second most open economy in ASEAN with a 20.8 percent share of trade in gross domestic product, after only Singapore (32.6 percent), but the share of Vietnam's trade with ASEAN in its foreign trade has decreased from 30.8 percent in 2013 to 24.1 percent in 2018.

Yet, even as Vietnam presently can cast a wider economic net beyond its neighborhood, Southeast Asia remains both the geographic and geopolitical anchors for its strategic autonomy. As the professor Wang Gungwu said in his recent interview with ISEAS, "ASEAN gave Hanoi a chance to look elsewhere beyond China, and not to be left alone with its big northern neighbor as it had been for millennia."

This historical background underpins Vietnam's multidirectional foreign policy, which then sets the stage for Vietnam to be among the most strategically outward-looking members in ASEAN.

Through its extensive bilateral engagements with the major powers and ASEAN-led frameworks, Hanoi consistently seeks to maintain an open and inclusive regional architecture. At the same time, fostering ASEAN unity has become Vietnam's central priority. On how ASEAN should best respond to US-China strategic rivalry, the top choice for Vietnamese respondents in the survey (62.5 percent) is to enhance ASEAN's resilience and unity to fend off pressure from the two major powers.

With the theme "cohesive and responsive", Hanoi is spot-on in identifying the crux of ASEAN's challenge moving forward. Yet, a right prescription is not enough to make a good doctor. The theme must reflect Vietnam's long-term commitment to and investment in ASEAN, not just a time-bound slogan to expire by end-2020.

To that effect, Hanoi must invest its diplomacy and growing geopolitical value in fostering consultation and consensus within ASEAN on key issues, including those related to the South China Sea disputes or the Rakhine state in Myanmar.

Straddling both mainland and maritime Southeast Asia, Vietnam is well-positioned to think and act regionally. In fact, Southeast Asia is often cited as an example of an "imagined community" since it came into being as a region in very recent history and the nation-states that call it home

are vastly diverse. Vietnam can play a key role in making it real in the spirit of “think community, act community”. To that end, its ASEAN chairmanship 2020 will be a crucial test.

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